

Gary & Beckie Galonek Trip to H-4

August 14th, 2018

Our adventure to H-4 began with a red-eye flight from Boston to Keflavik, where I mistakenly thought (despite best laid plans!) that the regional airport was next door. After a nail biting 40-minute cab ride to the Reykjavik airport, we made our connecting flight to the tiny airstrip in Isafjordur by about 10 minutes! We had contracted with Borea Adventures to scoop us at the airport, drop us to the only ferry heading to the Bay of Adalvik, and bring our luggage to our guesthouse in Isafjordur. The ferry was idling by the time we arrived! We only had a 2-day window to pull this off before meeting 2 other couples in Reykjavik, and day 2 was going to be rough seas with no guarantee of the ferry running, so this was our only shot. Making that ferry was one of the biggest reliefs of my life, yet the hard work on very little sleep still lay ahead for my wife Beckie and I. It was a relatively calm blue-sky hour plus boat ride over to Adalvik with breaching whales and breathtaking scenery in the Westfjords to make ride fly by!.

We arrived with many other hikers to a few drop-off spots in the bay. There are many scenic hikes in the Westfjords, but no one else on the ferry was hiking to H-4 (though we encountered one other hiker at a distance crossing our path). We did get some good tips on our hike from a guide on the ferry. After taking an inflatable Kodiak boat from the ferry to the dock, we finally set off on the 6+mile hike, with 1,500 feet of elevation gain, to H-4. It was mostly blue sky, with one fog bank nearing H-4 from our point of view at the base.

As we ascended, we could make out the old airstrip near the bay that was used to ferry men and supplies to the radar site. At one point we decided to cut off some time by scampering through the rocks and brush only to realize it was a huge mistake, with some very hard climbing (on all 4's at one point!) and near ankle sprains. Back on the path, we would no longer veer off. As the fog rolled in, we made out a single dilapidated building to our right. We were hungry so decided to rest there and eat the MRE's I brought in my pack. This single building didn't make sense to me as all the pictures I saw showed multiple structures. I was able to get my dad, Ed Galonek ('59/'60), on the cell who explained that the building was not part of the main complex. After our rest and lunch, we walked back to the main path in increasing fog and continued up the rocky climb. As if on cue, the fog lifted, and we could make out the crumbling structures that constituted H-4 ahead! It was as beautiful a setting as Ed had described, and when I called him again to say that I made it he marveled that he could here me clear as day, when they could barely communicate one building to the next when it was storming.

We spent a couple hours carefully walking through the ruins, as there was plenty of evidence of fallen slabs of cement that would surely kill us if we were under them at the wrong time. I was able to find the gymnasium where my father boasted of his undefeated 2 on 2 basketball record with his buddy Tony Lazarro. The beam that he said he would lob balls over and in to the basket was still there. I zip tied a montage of pictures of my father and some of his fellow Air Force buddies to a beam near the backboard. My wife and I had a nice toast on the platform that once housed the radar dome, thankful for having made it there safely and for the service of all who occupied H-4. There was also a newer structure that looked to be a weather station of some sort, and some full cans of gasoline hiding nearby.

We tried to hustle back down to the bay with whatever energy we had left as Borea had arranged for a fishing boat to scoop us as no ferries were heading back to Isafjordur in the early evening. We could see our ride fishing in the bay a good hour before we would reach him. I knew we'd still be a little early but envisioning him taking off sped up our walk. At the bottom of the hill was erected signage as a tribute to the U.S. Airforce and H-4. I believe this was erected when Reed Thomas had visited in 2006. This fishing boat captain was quite a character, the old timer and his father had fished these waters for decades. He took us to these bird cliffs where ropes dangled from the sheer ledge for people to climb down and scoop bird eggs, a very popular food staple in Iceland. Unfortunately, he had only agreed to take us back to Bolungarvik, where we still had to taxi back through the mountain tunnel to finally arrive at our guesthouse by around 9:00 PM. It was perhaps the most exhausted, yet fulfilled and grateful, we had been in our lives!

Our friends met us day on day 3 and were amazed by our story. The waterfalls, geysers, Blue Lagoon and the other iconic Icelandic sites were wonderful, but our adventure to H-4 on Mount Straumnes topped them all!